

THE DOSSAL OF THE CHAPEL OF THE HOLY CROSS IN MONTEFALCO

ART-HISTORICAL NOTES AND RESTORATION



The dossal used to be on the altar of the Chapel of the Holy Cross, the walls of which had been frescoed by two artists known as the First and Second Masters of the Blessed Clare of Montefalco. The first of these Masters also created the dossal.

In 1927, because the convent was in economic difficulties, the work was sold in a very poor condition to the Vatican.

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In the centre is a *Crucifixion* surmounted by the *Mystical Pelican* which pierces its own breast to feed its hungry young. In the tragic group of Mary between the Faithful Women, the painter employs a poetic style of portraiture widespread in the Franciscan milieu.

To the sides, on two levels and in a naïve style like that of a fable, the stories of the two martyrs *Blaise and Catherine of Alexandria* are shown as they appear in the *Legenda Aurea* by Jacopo da Varazze.

Catherine, a young Christian from a noble family of Alexandria in Egypt, opposed the Emperor Maxentius during the Roman occupation. She was tortured on the wheel and finally beheaded. Her body was transported by angels to Sinai where a convent was dedicated to her. Catherine, whose emblems are the wheel and the crown, is also patron saint of wet-nurses (in one scene, milk pours from her crushed head). Blaise, Bishop of Sebastea (Cappadocia), was forced to hide in a cave during the reign of Diocletian. Here the birds brought him food and animals sought him out to receive his blessing. After his arrest, a woman cooked and fed him the same piglet Blaise had previously saved. This episode is shown on the dossal as well as on the fresco in the Chapel.

In another scene, he saves a child from choking to death on a fishbone. He was condemned to torture with iron combs and finally beheaded. His cult is dear to the Augustinians and to country people.

In the immediacy of its style, the painting exercised a strong empathic power over the devout viewer who was immersed in the contemplation of the drama of the Cross and became an ideal participant in the Saints' stories. The faithful were induced to react with violence against the evil figures and to damage them with sharp implements.

When it came from Montefalco to the Vatican in 1927, the dossal was in two parts.

A first restoration was made in 1928 of both the wooden support and the painted surface. On that occasion a crack running through the length of the painting was repaired.

A second restoration was carried out in 1970 when the dossal was included among the furnishings of the Pontifical Apartment.

The final intervention in 2017 involved a particularly careful repair of the damage caused by popular devotion.

This consisted of scratches and lacunae of various sizes which were deliberately inflicted on the evil and negative characters, especially in the scenes of martyrdom, during ancient times when the dossal was on the altar of the Chapel of the Holy Cross. It was therefore necessary to treat and repair these lacunae which, besides compromising the work aesthetically, made it hard to read clearly.

After a careful cleansing of the traces of glue, wax and retouching, these seriously compromised portions of the surface were restored by applying fine dots of water colour.

This choice was dictated by the wish to reconcile two distinct requirements: on the one hand, the duty to restore legibility to the narration of the Saints' lives and to the *Crucifixion*, and on the other the requirement to preserve the significant historical evidence of the most genuine, aggressive and invasive manifestations of adherence to the cult.